

Two Dips and I'm Outta Here

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It was one of the coldest February days I could remember when three shipmates (an HT1, HT2 and HTFN) and I started replacing side fenders aboard an LPD. While the HT1 and HTFN went to the ship to remove the old fenders and prepare the working area, the HT2 and I stayed in the shipfitter shop and made the new fenders.

Around noon, we all met at the ship. The wind was howling, and three-fourths of the harbor was covered with ice as we got ready to go to work. We had to weld the new fenders on the starboard side of the ship, about 15 feet off the water. With heating strips placed around the weld area, we rigged the fenders into position. Each one was 4 feet long and weighed 80 pounds.

The top and bottom edge of each fender required welding. Doing the top edge would be no problem. To weld the bottom edge and seam, though, someone would have to go over the side, and that task wouldn't be easy. Because of the miserable weather, each of us was wearing at least five layers of clothing. We looked like a clan of Stay-Puf marshmallow men.

The HT1 had a simple idea how to reach the bottom edge. One of us would don a safety harness, then get on a scaffolding and be lowered over the side with a welding lead in our hand. Once the line on the scaffolding was tied off, the welding would begin.

I wasn't afraid of heights or water, so I volunteered to go over the side. It was 1300 but still brutally cold as I tested the welder, set all the controls where I wanted them, and adjusted the safety harness. Bending over to grab the deck combing, I lowered myself to the scaffolding. Then,

I jumped a couple of times to make sure it would hold me, and when the HT1 had secured the line, I was ready—or, so I thought.

Grabbing some slack welding lead in one hand, I pulled on the line. Suddenly, the knot came loose, and I found myself treading water. My clothes already were freezing by the time my shipmates got me back on deck. The HT1 told the HT2 to take me to the barracks so I could change and to bring me back to complete the job.

When we returned, I was wearing even more layers of clothing than I had on the first time. Immediately, I got on the scaffolding and was lowered into position, then yelled for the HT1 to tie me off. When he hollered that the scaffolding was secure, I asked, "Are you sure?"

With his affirmative reply, I again gathered up some slack welding lead and gave a light pull on the scaffolding line. When nothing happened, I got into position to start welding. I soon realized I needed more slack welding lead, so I asked for it.

"OK, you have it," said the HT1, as he gave me about 12 more inches. He barely had finished his statement

when a gust of wind hit me, causing me to lose my balance. About the same time, the knot in the scaffolding came loose again, and I took my second dip.

This trip to the icy water was all the fun I could stand for one day. I was numb by the time I got back on deck, so I headed for the warmth of the barracks and stayed there while my shipmates finished the job. 🍷

The author was assigned to the Afloat Safety Programs Directorate at the Naval Safety Center when he wrote this article. The incident he describes took place in 1980. He had been in the Navy two years and was assigned to SIMA Little Creek.

